

High Holy Day Speech
Mark Brownstein, President
Congregation Beth El
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I want to share something with you. A tee shirt. My favorite tee shirt.

I don't know if all of you can see it clearly. It has a pair of cartoon hiking boots painted on it. And underneath those boots, the caption says:

Not All Who Wander Are Lost.

The difference between wandering and lost is your frame of mind. Wandering is characterized by curiosity, wonder, surprise, and discovery. You welcome detours and are open to the new possibilities they create. Lost is characterized by disorientation, frustration, anxiety, and impatience. In both cases, you are traveling from point A to point B. The difference is in what you make of the journey.

I bring this up tonight, because, quiet obviously, we are on a journey. We find ourselves in an unfamiliar place, and throughout the coming year, we will be without spaces that are familiar and comforting. This is unsettling.

Although I can assure you that we will end in a place that is spiritually uplifting and beautiful, I understand that no one sitting here tonight will feel truly at ease until our journey is finished. And this is many, many months away, with many challenges and detours ahead. No construction project, however big, or small, ever goes precisely according to plan.

At this moment of displacement and uncertainty, we must make a choice. Are we wandering, or are we lost? Personally, I choose to wander.

Wandering comes naturally to Jews. We've been doing it for centuries, and as a consequence of this we've become quite good at it.

Not that wandering is easy. There is much tragedy and pain that has come as a consequence of our displacement. But it is also true that our culture, our rituals, our faith have been enriched by our wanderings. The secret of our success as a people is to remain internally rooted no matter where we have lived, and no matter how many times we have been transplanted.

There is a reason that God bestowed the Torah upon us in the wilderness. He did not wait until we arrived at the Promised Land to give us Torah. He presented it to us long before we arrived, in the midst of our wandering. In this sequence of things, it is clear that our claim to a home – Eretz Yisrael comes after our commitment to God and each other to be a holy community, and not the other way around. And as has been demonstrated many times through the ages, this commitment has proven to be resilient far from our home, and the key to bringing us back to it.

The same is true for Beth El. We have a beautiful building, and the time away from it is inconvenient, stressful, and, for some, even painful, but the building is not Beth El. YOU are Beth El.

The hundreds of hours that many of you invested in transforming this space from a plain middle school into a place that feels like Beth El affirms this. Your presence here tonight affirms this. The surroundings are strange, but the people and the spirit are familiar. Wherever we are - we are here.

On Rosh Hashanah, Rabbi spoke eloquently about her vision for our community in the coming year. Her vision is my vision. And as she promised, in the mail, this week, you received a guide to all of the many exciting, stimulating, engaging things that will be going on at Beth El over the coming year. Some will be in our building, and some will be elsewhere. New opportunities to pray, to learn, to have fun, and sometimes in new places. What you have received is more than a program guide. It is an invitation to wander.

Beth El is a strong, committed, active community. Whether it is faithfully attending the morning minyan – 7:45 am weekdays, 8:15 am Sundays - making a shiva minyan, supporting the interfaith food pantry and soup kitchen, or responding to the call when something needs to be set up or schlepped, many of you give of yourselves in ways that are amazing.

This past Shabbat I arrived at shul to find that Norma Aronson had taken it upon herself to repair our Chumashim, many of which have bindings that are failing. When I asked Cantor Fine if Norma had any special skill in repairing books – maybe she came from a long line of bookbinders? – he said no. So why did she take on this task? I asked. Well, he shrugged, she had glue. And that pretty much sums up the Beth El way: a little glue, a lot of heart, and a willingness to step in and do what needs to be done without being asked. On behalf of all of us, thank you, Norma. And thank you, to all of you, who give of your time to help our community and others in so many ways.

But, just in case you need a formal invitation to get involved, we sent you a personally addressed Mitzvah card with your High Holy Day tickets. On it you

will find many ways to strengthen your commitment to mitzvot in ways that strengthen Beth El. If you have already returned it, thank you. If you haven't, then tonight when you return home from shul, find the card, fold down a tab or two, and bring it to shul with you tomorrow. Hand it to an usher, and we will make sure that the appropriate committee chair calls you to get involved. And, in advance, let me say thank you.

But no community can survive on good works alone. Wandering has its rewards, but there needs to be a home to return to. And for this, there needs to be money. And here, we at Beth El need to do better.

There are members in this room who have demonstrated incredible generosity over the years, and continue to do so. This fiscal year, our clergy and professional staff, have volunteered to forgo raises we promised and they earned, so that we can balance our budget this year. Without asking, members come up to me and offer to pay for things we need but can't otherwise afford.

These are amazing demonstrations of commitment to our community, equal to the many volunteer efforts I mentioned a moment ago. But I will be frank: more of you need to be more deeply engaged in providing financial support to our community.

Of course, I know that times are tough. In my own household, we've seen furloughs. And I know that unemployment has touched a number of us. None of us have been unaffected by recent events. And yet, the obligation to support this congregation is on all of us.

145 individuals or families have supported our capital campaign, and with this, we have raised nearly \$4.7 million dollars toward our much needed renovation. There are 485 individuals or families who are members of this congregation. Imagine how much more we could raise if all of us contributed to the best of their financial ability.

Soon after Yom Kippur, you will receive two phone calls from a fellow congregant. The first is for our annual campaign where your generous contribution supports our annual budget. This year the goal is 100% participation and at least \$155,000 money critically needed to meet financial obligations in the budget you adopted at our annual congregational meeting this past June.

The second will be to discuss your pledge to the capital campaign. In some cases, we will be asking you to make a pledge. In other cases, we will be asking you to accelerate or expand on a pledge you have already made. Yes, we have the bank commitments in place to borrow the money we need to finish the renovation, but frankly, our goal should be to pay for this project outright. A refurbished building, free and clear of debt would be an extraordinary gift to ourselves, enabling us to minimize or avoid annual dues surcharges in the years ahead, and it is the surest path we can take to secure the future of this community that we love. I believe we have the capability to do this.

Let us remember that no sooner than Moses had descended from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments, the community commenced with creating an ark physically worthy of the gift they had received, drawn from the gold, and silver, and everything valuable that the nation of Israel had with them as they wandered

in the wilderness. And they gave willingly, and repeatedly, until finally, Moses had to tell them to stop, because the people's efforts had been more than enough for the task of creating a suitable Ark.

That would be a good problem to have!

May our wandering now be as fruitful for us as was for our forbearers then.

Through it, may we grow and learn, and strengthen our commitment to God, to Torah, and to each other. And may we, like them, return to our home, restored, and triumphant.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah